

Culture Wars

How the Food Giants Turned Yogurt, a Health Food, into Junk Food



Navigating the Dairy Case to Find Quality, Safety and Nutritional Value

A Report by The Cornucopia Institute | November 2014



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The Cornucopia Institute wishes to sincerely thank the thousands of family farmers and their “urban allies” who fund our work with their generous donations.

Special thanks to Olivia Shelton and Maggie Yount for their work on this report.

The Cornucopia Institute is dedicated to the fight for economic justice for the family-scale farming community. Through research and education, our goal is to empower farmers and their customers in the good food movement, both politically and through marketplace initiatives.

Cornucopia’s Organic Integrity Project acts as a corporate and governmental watchdog assuring that no compromises to the credibility of organic farming methods and the food it produces are made in the pursuit of profit. We actively resist regulatory rollbacks and the weakening of organic standards, to protect and maintain consumer confidence in the organic food label.

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Executive Summary

Yogurt, made the traditional way, is one of humanity’s traditional, nourishing foods. Milk from organic pasture-raised cows, rich in calcium, protein, beneficial fats and other healthy nutrients, is fermented using live cultures, resulting in a wholesome, live food teeming with beneficial microorganisms.

But giant food corporations, led by General Mills (Yoplait) and Groupe Danone (Dannon), and now joined by many others including Walmart and PepsiCo, have all too often managed to turn this health food into quasi-junk food.

Many yogurt products on store shelves today are marketed and hyped as healthy, but a close inspection of the ingredients list, sugar content, and how the ingredients are produced paints a very different picture.

Conventional yogurt of today is produced with milk from cows that are nearly always confined and unable to graze on pasture, and fed genetically engineered grains. Chemical defoamers, banned in organics, are commonly added to milk during the processing of lowfat yogurt. Add in artificial sweeteners or high doses of sugar and high fructose corn syrup, artificial colors, synthetic preservatives, and the gut-wrenching thickener carrageenan, and it’s plain to see that many yogurt products are essen-

tially junk food masquerading as health food.

But these products are marketed as healthy in part by displaying the industry’s “Live and Active Cultures” seal, which supposedly assures a high level of beneficial microorganisms, also known as probiotics. The seal is found on nearly all conventional yogurt by popular brands owned by corporations such as General Mills and Groupe Danone. However, the popular marketing approach is not used by organic brands, largely because of the cost of the program testing. Consumers may be tempted to choose products with the Live and Active Cultures seal, perceiving it as healthier, over products without it—which may mean choosing conventional yogurt over organic.

Testing commissioned by The Cornucopia Institute, performed by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s Food Processing Center, revealed that many organic farmstead yogurt products, without the Live and Active Cultures seal, actually contained higher levels of probiotics than conventional yogurt with the seal.



Yoplait Go-Gurt—“fruity” drinkable yogurt in a tube marketed to children—has no actual fruit but tastes and looks like fruit yogurt due to artificial colors and artificial flavors. Go-Gurt also contains the harmful ingredient carrageenan along with artificial preservatives and synthetic nutrients. The milk is conventionally produced, from CAFO (confined animal feeding operation) dairy cows fed genetically engineered corn and soybeans. And on a price-per-ounce basis, the Go-Gurt brand, owned by General Mills, costs more than many organic yogurt products.

Cornucopia’s analysis also found that some conventional yogurt products on store shelves do not meet the legal definition to be labeled as “yogurt.” The FDA has a “standard of identity” for yogurt that specifies which types of ingredients can and cannot be added to a product labeled and sold as “yogurt.” Artificial sweeteners, preservatives, milk protein concentrates and artificial nutrients other than vitamins A and D do not appear on the FDA’s list. Therefore, any product containing these ingredients should not be marketed and sold as “yogurt”—including products from most of the Yoplait, Dannon and other conventional brands, as well as products from most store label brands, including Walmart’s Great Value.

The addition of certain ingredients is not simply a question of legality; it also raises an important question about the healthfulness of the food. Many ingredients found in yogurt, such as aspartame and artificial colors, have been the subject of controversy as to their adverse health effects. For example, research has linked the artificial sweetener aspartame to brain tumors and neurological disease in laboratory animals. Carrageenan, a food thickener, has been shown to promote colon tumors and cause inflammation and digestive disease in laboratory animals. Artificial colors have been linked to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children. These ingredients and others commonly found in yogurt have no place in a food marketed as healthy.

This report outlines the various reasons people should choose organic yogurt over conventional. The USDA Organic seal on a yogurt product is much

more important, in terms of healthfulness, than the Live and Active Cultures seal, the “Greek” label or any other marketing claim or label.

What This Report Covers

SECTION I explores the emerging science to better understand the *human microbiome*, the hundred trillion microbes that inhabit our bodies and play a central role in our health. Research suggests that cultivating a healthy community of gut bacteria is not as simple as ingesting a daily dose of probiotics, but instead depends on overall dietary choices. This includes avoiding artificial sweeteners, which may be toxic to beneficial microorganisms. Avoiding chemical additives in foods in general is likely a good rule to support a healthy microbiome, which is why it is important to avoid foods, including yogurt, with these ingredients.

Section I also assures consumers that organic yogurt without the Live and Active Cultures seal is a good choice, as it often contains higher levels of live and active cultures than yogurt products with the seal. Moreover, courts and the Federal Trade Commission have ruled that advertisements and health claims related to probiotics are misleading. These advertisements attempt to convince consumers to choose conventional yogurt with designer strains of probiotics, but scientific proof that these strains are superior to the ones commonly found in traditional organic yogurt is weak.

SECTION II explores the many benefits of organic yogurt over conventional. Only organic yogurt assures that the milk used to produce the yogurt came from cows that grazed on pasture, were given a non-GMO organic feed and were not treated with antibiotics or synthetic growth hormones. Conventional yogurt can be processed with chemical defoamers, which is prohibited in the manufacturing of organic yogurt.

Defoamers, and many other “processing aids,” are not required by the FDA to be listed on the ingredient label even though residues of these materials remain in food products.

Testing by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s laboratory showed that there are also nutritional benefits to eating whole-milk organic yogurt: better ratios



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of omega-3 to omega-6 fatty acids and higher levels of other beneficial fats including conjugated linoleic acid (CLA).

SECTION III responds to marketing claims that paint “Greek yogurt” as a healthier choice than other types of yogurt, including organic whole-milk yogurt. Authentic Greek yogurt is yogurt that has been further processed (*strained*) to remove the liquid whey.

Lesser quality Greek yogurt products add thickening agents/stabilizers to achieve thicker “mouth feel” or even imported milk protein concentrate. (There are no FDA standards for what constitutes Greek yogurt.) The remaining solids result in a product with a thicker consistency and higher levels of protein. Greek yogurt is marketed as healthy and touted by weight-loss programs as beneficial for its high protein and low fat content.

Chobani, a pioneering manufacturer of Greek yogurt in the U.S., has taken the yogurt market by storm. Yet most Greek yogurt products are not certified organic. The milk used to produce Chobani yogurt, like most other conventional yogurt products, comes from conventionally managed cows, many of which are raised in industrial-scale operations on a diet of conventional, genetically engineered corn and soybeans.



The Cornucopia Institute encourages people who buy yogurt to buy minimally processed organic brands, both to support organic farmers and to support their family’s health. Cornucopia’s Yogurt Buyer’s Guide, available at www.cornucopia.org, provides a resource for consumers who seek the highest-quality yogurt.



Many yogurt products contain high levels of added sugars, in many cases exceeding the American Heart Association’s recommended maximum daily intake *in a single serving*.

Many of the Greek yogurt brands that followed in Chobani’s footsteps are made with milk protein concentrate (MPC), which is primarily imported from other countries in powdered form as a way to avoid the time-consuming straining process. MPC imports drive down the price of domestically produced dairy, squeezing many dairy farmers out of business.

In addition to the use of MPC and the waste problem associated with the strained whey, this section points out that many Greek yogurt products contain high amounts of added sugar and are not as “healthy” as advertised. And when consumers choose protein-rich Greek yogurt, they are missing out on the many beneficial fats essential for health which are found at higher levels in organic whole-milk yogurt.

SECTION IV outlines the ingredients commonly found in yogurt, other than the milk and live cultures. Many yogurt products contain high levels of added sugars or high fructose corn syrup, including corn syrups with exceptionally high levels of fructose, misleadingly labeled as “fructose.”

Other ingredients of concern commonly found in yogurt include aspartame, linked to brain tumors and neurological disease in laboratory animals; carrageenan, an additive that has been linked to gastrointestinal inflammation and disease; and artificial colors, which have been linked to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children.

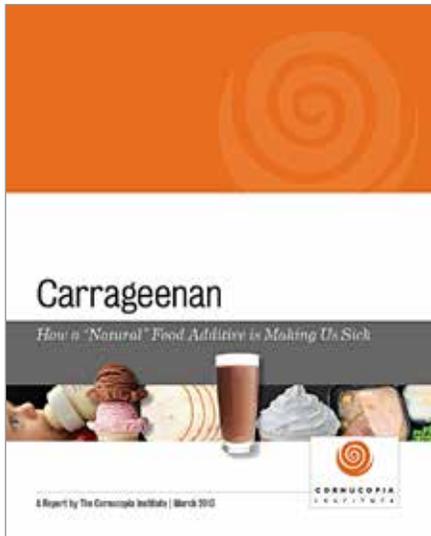
SECTION V is a cost comparison of conventional versus organic yogurt products that challenges the myth that organic is always more expensive. In markets around the country, from member-owned co-ops in urban centers to Whole Foods Market in upscale suburbs to Walmart in rural communities, organic yogurt products can often be bought for less on a price-per-ounce basis than many conventional yogurts.

For example, organic yogurt from farmstead dairies in 32-ounce containers often costs less on a per-ounce basis than most conventional yogurt in 6-ounce containers. And most traditional organic yogurt costs less than conventional Greek-style yogurt, especially the high-priced name brands like Chobani. (Although always relatively high priced,

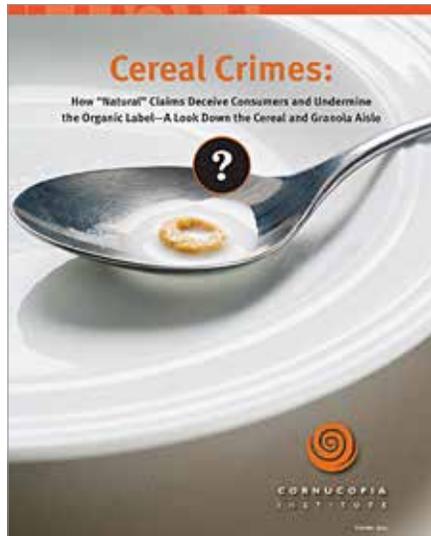
Chobani raised prices by 30% in 2014, according to the dairy industry journal *The Milkweed*.) Organic yogurt also often costs less than heavily processed yogurt in special packaging marketed to children, like Yoplait's Go-Gurt and Dannon's Danimals, with their long lists of artificial ingredients.

In conclusion, conventional yogurt makers deceptively market their products as "healthy," especially yogurt with the Live and Active Cultures seal and Greek varieties. Yet the documented best choice, in terms of healthfulness, is organic yogurt with a short ingredients list. After all, all that is required for making healthy yogurt is fresh, organic milk and live cultures—with added organic fruit or unrefined sweeteners, if so desired.

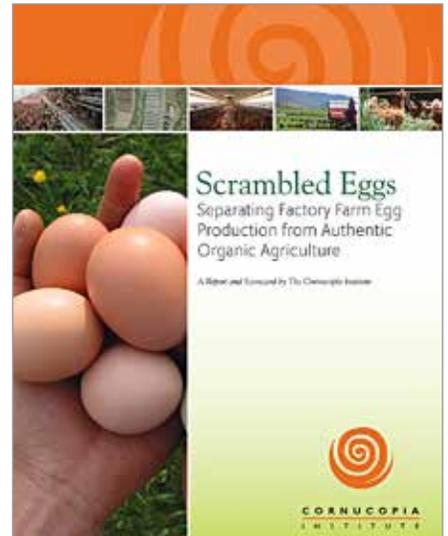
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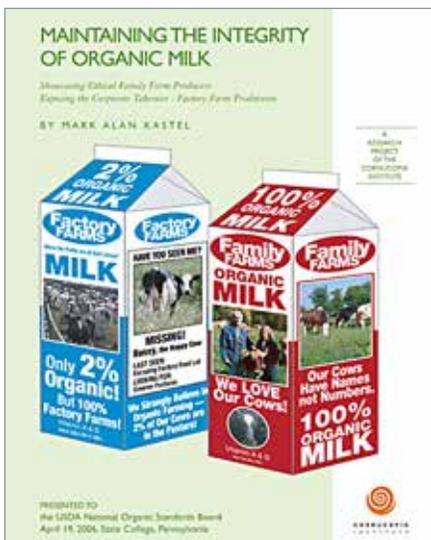
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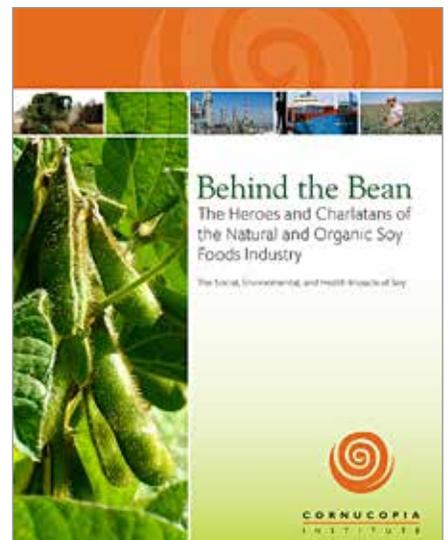
Scrambled Eggs. Separating Factory Farm Egg Production from Authentic Organic Agriculture



Maintaining the Integrity of Organic Milk: Showcasing ethical family farm producers, exposing the corporate takeover — factory farm production



Replacing Mother—Imitating Human Breast Milk in the Laboratory. Novel oils in infant formula and organic foods: Safe and valuable functional food or risky marketing gimmick?



Behind the Bean. The Heroes and Charlatans of the Natural and Organic Soy Foods Industry



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THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE is engaged in research and educational activities supporting the ecological principles and economic wisdom underlying sustainable and organic agriculture. Through research and investigations on agricultural and food issues, The Cornucopia Institute provides needed information to family farmers, consumers, stakeholders involved in the good food movement, and the media.

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